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ABSTRACT

Most of our language use involves asking and answering questions, and in the second language classroom such exchanges tend to be rare. When there are opportunities for sharing, the teacher usually asks all the questions and the student answers. Some strategies that give students more practice in asking questions include: letting them devise and pose questions to the class, perhaps as a spokesperson for a subgroup, about readings; having them interview a character from a reading passage; having them interview each other in an opinion poll, using a variety of constructions; using guessing games; constructing a telephone inquiry; preparing and asking questions of a visiting native speaker; conducting a "twenty questions" game or some variation; playing variations on a "Jeopardy" game; and conducting a classroom inventory. It is also important to emphasize questioning skills in oral and written tests so that those skills are viewed by students as important and useful. (MSE)

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Who Should Be Asking the Questions in the Second Language Classroom?

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One of our common needs and desires is to send and receive messages and information; most of our use of language involves asking and answering questions. In the second-language classroom such exchanges tend to be rare. When there are opportunities for sharing usually the teacher asks all the questions and the students answer. A. L. W. Rees sums up the situation with the following

> If the learner is not to develop as some kind of ventriloquist's dummy but is to acquire a balanced command of the target language, it is obvious that he must become actively familiar with the whole range of question forms . . .[1]

In 1973, Powell investigated high school students' ability to use questions to communicate. In her study, some 200 students of French interviewed her to obtain information about her background, interests and life. She discovered that most of the subjects had trouble asking questions, particularly *why* questions, and wondered "if they (the students) were encouraged to ask 'real' questions, which happens rarely in a classroom, this might not be such a common error."[2]

Recognizing the need to give our students more practice in asking questions, we have collected and developed a number of strategies. Though the ideas presented here are designed for beginning college French or Spanish classes, they can readily be implemented in any language, in any classroom, if the teacher is committed to the idea that to learn language students must use it.

Students will make errors in using many of these activities, but the

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teacher must view such errors as a natural part of the language learning process. Teachers can reduce the frequency of these errors by trying to ensure that students have the necessary competency before they are asked to perform.

Using questions to check comprehension of passages that students have read is banal. The teacher asks a question and students (sometimes without understanding what they are saying) recite a line from the textbook. This practice, though often terribly tedious, is endured by the better students, at least. With a minor variation this activity can be drastically changed. Let the students ask the questions about what they have read. Divide them into small groups and assign each a portion of the passage and then devise questions. The teacher may choose to let a spokesperson for the group address the questions to the class or even to the teacher.

Another device for checking comprehension and using what students have read involves asking them to interview a character from the reading passage. A student may play the role of this character or the teacher may occasionally agree to be the interviewee. But all the students participate in asking the questions. To give this activity more authenticity, create an imaginary background situation in which the interview is to occur. The teacher can also encourage the students to go beyond what is actually given in the text to ask questions whose answers might only be implied.

Opinion polls also get students involved. Suppose that the class has just studied the partitive construction in French in expressions such as *du tact, de la patience*. The teacher can designate five students (not just the best ones) to be the interviewers. Each interviewer is given a card with a question on it (e.g., *Pour être professeur, qu'est-ce qu'il faut avoir?*). The interviewers go around to each student, ask their questions, record the responses, and finally report the results to the class. This activity works well if it is planned and if the students have sufficient command of the necessary structure and vocabulary.

Polls such as the one previously described can be used with almost any topic. The following poll could be useful in providing Spanish students with practice concerning such omnipresent dilemmas as *¿qué?* versus *¿cuál?* or the personal *a*:

1. *¿Cuál es tu mes favorito?*
2. *¿Cuál es tu día favorito de la semana?*

3. *¿En qué mes naciste?*
4. *¿Qué vas a comer esta noche?*
5. *¿Quién te llamó anoche?*
6. *¿A quién llamaste anoche?*

A poll can be developed with every lesson and for almost every grammatical topic.

Still another way to get students to do the asking is interviewing each other in pairs and then reporting the results to the class. Suppose that the indefinite article is being studied. The teacher can give out cards with questions that one student uses to interview another; for example—*demandez si elle/il a des frères ou des soeurs, si elle/il a une guitare.*[3] Here the students are asking the questions, and the impressive aspect is that they are using language to gain new information. Be sure to practice question forms when students are introduced to this technique. Otherwise they are likely to ask, "Does *he* have any brothers or sisters?"

Let the students be guessers. For instance, prepositions with names of countries have just been introduced to beginning French students. The teacher's goal is for the students to know the names of major countries and use the proper preposition for *to* with those names. Traditionally, the teacher might have accomplished this goal with substitution drills and translation exercises, but there are variable alternatives. Students are asked to think about a country they would like to visit (supply the names of the countries on a transparency visible to the whole class). The class tries to guess which country each person has in mind by asking: *Est-ce que vous voudriez aller au Mexique?* The same technique can be used with the days of the week, dates, and years. Let students guess each other's birthdays or even the year in which the teacher was born.

A technique for getting students to write questions is to present a situation in which they will have to generate questions to obtain information and solve a problem. An example of the type of context is as follows: You have just moved to Angers and you want to go to a movie tonight, but you do not know what is playing where, at what time the shows are, how much a movie costs, or where the theater is located. Write down the questions that you will ask the person on the telephone at the theater.

A variation of the above technique is for the teacher or another student to make a true statement with minimal information: e.g., *Salí*

anoche. Students then ask questions to find out more information: *¿Adónde fuiste? ¿Con quién fuiste? ¿Qué hiciste?*

Of course, the ultimate technique is to have the students prepare questions to get information from a native speaker who will be visiting the class. The teacher collects the questions in advance, corrects and returns them to the students to ask the guest. In lieu of a native speaker, use another teacher in the school, an advanced student, or a university student who speaks the language well.

Games can also be a source of fostering skill in using the interrogative. "Twenty Questions" can be both fun and rewarding. Ask a student to write down the name of a famous person living or dead. The other students in the class have a limit of twenty questions that they can ask to discover the celebrity's identity. Vary this by asking a student to think of another student in the class and by having the class ask such questions as "Is it a boy or a girl?" "Does she wear glasses?" "Does he have brown hair?" This is an occasion to review or practice noun/adjective agreement.

Another game that can create a lot of enthusiasm and interest is charades. For the Spanish teacher, charades can be used to review *ser* + a profession. Give each student the name of a profession on a slip of paper. The student must then act out this profession and the other class members try to identify the occupation by asking *¿Eres profesor?* etc. The French teacher can liven up the classroom by using this same technique to help students review idioms with *avoir*. It is much more interesting to have a student pretend to be starved and have his classmates asking *As-tu faim?* than to have the teacher ask: *Comment dit-on* "to be hungry" *en français?*

Variations on the old favorite "Jeopardy" also get students involved in asking questions. Start with any exercise in which students are asked to manipulate question words such as *où, comment, quand, pourquoi, avec qui*, etc. The teacher or another student gives the statement and then another student must supply a question that would have generated that answer. This game lends itself to team competition where the teacher or a student fires a statement and the first person on a team to give the correct question receives a point.

An excellent activity for use towards the end of the semester in a beginning-level course is the classmate inventory. In this activity, the student has a list of questions to ask of as many classmates as necessary to

complete the list. The student not only must ask the questions, but must design them from the teacher's directions. For example, the teacher will give the following set of instructions:

1. *Encuentre a alguien que haya nacido en el mismo mes que tú.*
2. *Encuentre a alguien que tenga el mismo programa favorito de televisión que tú,* or
3. *Trouvez quelqu'un qui soit né(e) dans un autre état.*
4. *Trouvez quelqu'un qui ait récemment vu le même film que vous.*

With each of these, the student must first form the question and then seek the answers. The instructions can direct students to find more than one person for each question, and the inventory list can be much longer. This end-of-semester activity challenges the students to formulate questions and also turns them loose with their communicative abilities for several minutes with the teacher limited to eavesdropping as the inventory-taking unfolds.

If having students acquire facility in asking questions is an important goal in our second-language classes, then it must also be an important part of our testing and evaluating. Students learn what they are held responsible for on tests. As a part of every oral and written test, we must let students show their skill in asking questions; otherwise, this skill will come to be viewed as secondary, unimportant.

All of the techniques presented in this paper have been designed to facilitate students' ability to produce and use questions in situations involving the desire to transmit a message. For the language teacher dedicated to developing communicative competence, the possibilities are infinite, and the winners are the students, who will be well-prepared to pop the question.

Notes

1. A. L. W. Rees, "Games and Question Practice," *English Language Teaching* 29, 2 (1975), pp. 135-143.
2. Patricia Barnes Powell, *An Investigation of Selected Syntactical and Morphological Structures in the Conversation of Secondary Students After Two Years Study of French.* (Unpublished dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1973).
3. Thérèse M. Bonin and Diane W. Burkhalter, "Real Communication through Interview and Conversation Cards," *Modern Language Journal* 59, 1 (1975), pp. 22-25.

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